

**BURNLEY BLUES FESTIVAL
Burnley Mechanics, 21-23 March**

This year's festival, the twentieth, promised to be something special, and it was, with the strongest line-up of any British festival for many years. This was reflected in sell-out crowds each night with festival goers braving rain, wind and snow to get there. Looking round the Mechanics, we are always amazed at the loyal

fans who turn up year after year, this year was no exception, with a good many familiar faces, all out to enjoy the cream of the crop of the current blues scene.

The opening act on the main stage on Friday, Denmark's Thorbjørn Risager, proved to have a solid, soulful voice, ably backed by his five piece band (trumpet, sax, bass, drums, piano, plus Risager himself on guitar) on a mixture



Earl Thomas. Photo: Phil Wight



Charlie Baty and Rick Estrin. Photo: Brian Smith

of blues and boogies all flavoured by a good dose of Louisiana sauce, a good start.

Then it was on to our first US guest: Earl Thomas has rapidly established himself as a favourite with the Burnley and Colne crowds over the last few years. He has a great soul voice and his previous shows over here have highlighted this to great effect. This year, his act veered more to the blues, with numbers like 'Got My Mojo Working', but to be honest, he's far better when he sticks to his own stuff, such as 'Last Train To Paris' and the great 'Don't Be Lyin' – both from his latest album, 'Soulshine'. A little man with a big voice, Earl Thomas pleased both his own fans and the many festival goers who perhaps were seeing him for the first time.

Another Burnley/Colne favourite followed: opening with an extended version of 'Juke', Little Charlie and The Nightcats did not disappoint and were as usual right on top of that Walter Jacobs/Myers Brothers sound, with great performances of a wide variety of material, taking in Sonny Boy Williamson and Kent Harris along the way. Rick Estrin is the ideal front man, always turning in an entertaining set with his superb harmonica playing set against a swinging background on 1950s styled Chicago blues. Estrin can play powerfully in a Little Walter style, sensitively in a Sonny Boy style, or just about any style required. Estrin has to be just about the best blues harmonica player on the circuit bar none. Equally talented is guitarist Charlie Baty, who backs Rick with everything from the Myers Brothers styled guitar to tough Chicago styled blues. Charlie himself played a stunning instrumental, demonstrating that he too is just about the best you are likely to see. Other numbers performed included several old favourites: 'Eyes Like A Cat', 'My Next Ex Wife' and, in response to requests from the crowd, 'Dump That Chump', earning them a standing ovation from the crowd, fantastic. This is likely to be Charlie's last UK trip as he is going into semi-retirement, but Rick is carrying on with the band, to be known as Rick Estrin And The Nightcats, with new guitarist Chris Anderson.

Saturday featured a diverse line up from raunchy blues shouting from Angela Brown; country blues with duo Johnny Mars and Michael Roach; with the Michael Roach band; to 1940s r&b piano star Little Willie Littlefield.

Angela Brown's set proved she has lost none of her power or charisma over the years. Once a semi-permanent festival player, it seems a while since we last saw her at Burnley, but the wait was worth it. On numbers like 'People Will Be People', 'Let The Back Door Hit Ya' and the rousing 'Glory Glory', Angela proved that she can still get the crowd eating out of her hands.

The Michael Roach band featuring Johnny Mars is a strange combination of horns and keyboard, with sometimes-acoustic guitar and Mars' amplified harmonica – very few artists have successfully combined the harmonica with a horn section. The horn section, which included the excellent Paul Corey and Cootie Alexander were a joy to behold, after experiencing several lesser horn players in previous bands. That said we are not altogether sure whether Muddy Waters numbers done in James Brown funk style, really work. They worked their way through Junior Wells' 'Messing With The Kid', with Sam and Dave style sax riffs, 'Hoochie Coochie Man', with Gizmo



Angela Brown. Photo: Idris Richards

on the harmonica to sound like a pipe organ playing 'Amazing Grace!', and Bo Carter's 'All 'Round Man'.

Michael Roach then put down his guitar and became a soul singer. Several of the numbers performed were Roach originals and the general arrangements were in the Stax or James Brown styles with a Billy Preston styled organ thrown in. The best two of their set were Bobby Bland's 'I Pity The Fool', with a tough Joe Houston style tenor solo from Paul Corey and Hank Ballard's 'Let's Go, Let's Go, Let's Go', which stuck reasonably close to the Ballard arrangement and benefited from Angela Brown joining Michael Roach to put in a powerful vocal. The Jerry McCain styled harmonica solo seeming just a little out of place but good all the same. A mixed bag.



Michael Roach and Johnny Mars. Photo: Brian Smith

Star of the festival, Little Willie Littlefield took to the stage after Mike Sanchez and his band had set the place rocking with Johnny Guitar Watson's 'Highway 60', featuring their young guitarist Oliver on a solo not at all like Watson, but very nicely played. Brook Benton's 'Kiddio' got the



Little Willie Littlefield. Photo: Idris Richards

usual Sanchez treatment, as did Willie Egan's 'Come On' and a tribute to Ike Turner with a killer version of 'Rocket 88'. The horn section really came into its own here, playing in unison with the guitar, they practically duplicated Ike's 1951 sound . . . and then the man himself, Little Willie Littlefield took the stage.

Willie opened solo on piano with 'Every Day I Have The Blues' and within the first minute the sound of Willie's left hand rhythm and rolling right hand improvisations changed the face of the festival to 1950s Texas or L.A. Littlefield, like Amos Milburn and Johnny Jones were, is one of those pianists who can take on board any song and when it comes out the other end, it's blues. His piano style, which owes a lot to Milburn, is one of really fluent and fluid blues playing, the likes of which are now few and far between. He can take 'Sweet Home Chicago' and churn it out as a unique Littlefield type number to a boogie rhythm, and he did!

Joined by Sanchez's band after a few numbers, Willie re-created that west coast r&b style as if it were 1950 again, including in the set Milburn's 'One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer' and a great reading of Ivory Joe Hunter's 'Since I Met You Baby', with breathy after hours sax from ace tenor man Martin Winnings. Joined again by Mike Sanchez they romped their way through Milburn's 'Let's Have A Party' and closed



Boo Boo Davis. Photo: Phil Wight

a better description, as a very effective and successful 'Link Wray' styled version of the classic. 'Luckily' for the audience, MC Chris Powell then appeared to have gone temporarily awol and this allowed two encores, "Bad Avenue' and 'Rock This House'. An excellent spot from an excellent and obviously multitalented band.

Festival closer was Duke Robillard on his first visit to Burnley, with a solid band that included Doug James doubling on tenor sax and blues harp, and Bruce Bears on keyboards. Playing for almost two hours, his set ran the gamut of straight-ahead blues including Eddie Boyd's 'Bluecoat Man', solid jazzy numbers (a lovely slow interpretation of 'I'll Always Be In Love With You'), swinging r&b including a house-wrecking reading of 'Honey Hush' (with what seemed like the whole house singing the 'hi yo Silver' chorus line!) and of course, with the audience calling for it, what else, 'T-Bone Shuffle'. Duke was in top-notch form and his set was a triumphal end to another superb weekend of blues. Will we be back next year? If the lineup's anywhere near as good as this, you can bet your life on it?

Tony Burke, Dave Clarke, Byron Foulger, Tony Watson and Phil Wight